

## **Transcript for Accessibility Bites: The Gift of Dyslexia**

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HELENA PRINS:

If you've never met me, my name's Helena Prins, and it's my privilege to host this series with you, and today we have a very special host. I'm going to hand the session over to Sue Blyth Hall, and today's session I predict will be different from the other sessions, and I hope you love it as much as I'm excited about it. Thank you.

SUE BYTH HALL:

So welcome, everybody. I am Sue Hall. You'll see my credentials in front of you on that slide. I'm a senior. I have salt and pepper hair and glasses, and you may hear that I was born in the UK. I've been dyslexic all my life, but I didn't know that I had the gift of dyslexia until I was in my 50s. It explained so much. Why I can get lost anywhere. Why I never passed a timed typing test, why I can read, but do not enjoy it. Why reading sends me to sleep very quickly. Why I can get to the bottom of the page and wonder what it was all about? Why most of the knowledge that I've memorized has disappeared. Why I don't do well with written instructions, but once shown, I've got it. Why I'm useless at math. Why I need landmarks instead of directions, never east or west. And why when I left school at 18, with the grades to go to university, I promised myself never to read another book as long as I lived, and I kept that promise for many years. Others might say, I'm creative. I have a butterfly brain. I see the bigger picture and am empathetic. I love nature and animals, and I can spell. I sorted that one out early on, unknowingly taking advantage of my gift.

My son's learning challenges led me to discover the real reason why so many so-called learning disabilities exist. When I use the word dyslexia today, I mean it to encompass dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, ADD, ADHD, auditory processing, and visual processing disorder. I use it as an umbrella word. And please note I will never use the term learning disability because in my many years of being dyslexic myself and 27 years of facilitating dyslexics, I can say with conviction that everyone is able to learn if they're taught in the way they were born to learn. Currently and sadly, rather than question the education system, the system decides to attach a learning disability label to an individual who does not fit the mould when it would be more accurate to attach the label to the system.

Most people think dyslexics reverse Bs and Ds and have difficulty reading and spelling, and this is often true. On this slide, you will find a link to the comprehensive list of 37 characteristics or symptoms: <https://positivedyslexia.com/about-dyslexia/how-to-tell>. You will hear the official estimate to be 10 to 15% of the population, but those are the individuals who get tested, and I believe that for everyone tested, there is an individual who has not been tested. Dr. Linda

Silverman, in her book, "Upside Down Brilliance" concurs that one-third of the population has this different way of thinking.

Most dyslexics are unaware of this gift and feel themselves to be less than, sometimes feeling stupid and disabled, which is just not true. They are, in fact, incredibly creative, inventive, empathetic problem solvers. Talented athletes, designers, architects, strategists, tradespeople, authors, scientists. I would actually want my surgeon to be dyslexic for the reason I'm about to share with you. The first myth to bust is that they excel at their craft because they had to work so hard. Not so. No, they should... I beg your pardon. They excel at their craft because of their gift as a consequence of their gift, not in spite of it. I believe the best way to help a student who is struggling is to understand and validate their innate learning style. And this is my goal for today to introduce you to the gift of dyslexia, which underlies both the challenges and the talents.

A very wise man, Ronald D Davis, discovered the gift of dyslexia to be a natural ability to alter perception, which we can use in response to confusion or for pleasure. And there are three parts to this challenge. Now, the first part, if you'd like to join in, I would like you to close your eyes and imagine an elephant. Now open your eyes. Some of you will have seen nothing. Some may be a flat 2D photograph of an elephant as if it were in a magazine. Some may see a 3D elephant. Some may see the word elephant or just hear the word elephant. We are all so wonderfully different, and we never ask each other how we think and how we learn. For those who saw the 2D or the 3D elephant, there is a part of you that was doing the looking. We call it the mind's eye, and it really doesn't matter what you call it. It's a point of perception. It's the part of you that does the looking when you imagine. When you go to a movie, you sit in your chair and you watch the film. You're not in the film, and it's the same when you imagine. When the film is imaginary, you're watching it from some part of you, which, as I say, we call the mind's eye. Dyslexics can not only perceive in 3D, but they can keep that image still, and they can move their point of perception around the image, seeing it from any angle. And it follows that sculptors, mechanics, Lego enthusiasts, people who put IKEA furniture together without the instructions may follow the image in their minds consciously. Many athletes who just know where to be and what shot to play are seen to be intuitive, and they are also following those images, but maybe subconsciously. Typically, we see our images at a rate of 32 a second, which is ridiculously fast. When the film comes through at the movie theatre, it's coming in at 24, 25 images a second. And because these images are so fast, it renders us unaware of this gift. But we benefit from the extra information. Wayne Gretzky knows that he sees the whole game from above. Not many people know it, but he does. And that's what makes him Wayne Gretzky.

Now, a 3D image, such as a dog, can be a dog from any, sorry, a dog can be a dog from whatever angle. It's a 3D image. It doesn't matter where you perceive a dog from. It's still a dog.

But when you start looking at the world of print, if you're looking at a lowercase D in front of you and your mind's eye goes off to 180 degrees, it's not a D anymore. It becomes a P. And so this ability that we have when it enters the 2D world of print, it starts working against us. When

looking at a lowercase D with our real yes, others might assume that that is all you see. But your perception might be viewing it from that 180, and then it becomes a P, and our brain becomes confused. Is it D or is it P? You don't know you're doing this and no one else knows you're doing this either. You are only aware of the resulting mistake. Sometimes people will see words from the other end. You might have noticed that words can become swords sometimes and vice versa. That's the first part of the challenge. This beautiful ability. I promise you, it is a very great part of our talents, as well as part of our challenge.

Now there are basically two ways of thinking. Sound thinkers who talk to themselves in their heads, they have an internal dialogue. Picture thinkers see images and run film in their head. They have very little internal dialogue, and you may have noticed someone who has to say their thoughts out loud in order to hear themselves think. They can't talk to themselves in their heads. So if they want to hear their thinking, they have to say it out loud. Now there is a continuum between those who only think in sound, no pictures at all, and those who only think in images with no internal dialogue. Most of us are a bit of a mixture, and we all occupy our own space on that continuum. But we also have, each of us has a preference. And we can divide this continuum into three, mostly sound, mostly image, and the good mixture in the middle. Our education system is built for the sound thinkers, and the most obvious difference that we have is that they dictate that we learn to read phonetically. And we picture thinkers just don't do that. Sound thinkers learn by memorizing and repetition of sound, and we do not. To learn by rote is to learn without thinking or understanding. And why would we do that? When I ask that question at pro d's, most people say to pass exams. And why is that a good answer? I've never understood. Now, when dyslexics appear to be failing in this sound system, they're given more of what they couldn't do already with the expectation of a different result, which is also the definition of insanity, right? They become convinced they're stupid because they couldn't do it in the reading phonetically. They couldn't do it in school. They couldn't do it with their parents. They couldn't do it with their tutor at home. And they do become convinced that they're stupid. And, again, this is the opposite of what is true. And sadly, the more phonetic reading instruction they receive, the worse their spelling will become because our language is not designed to be spelled phonetically. Only 20% of our words adhere to phonetic rules. Now, there are three parts to a letter.

This is the third part of the problem. The first part was disability to our perception. The second part is that we're in a system that doesn't follow our rules. And the third part is that there are three parts to every letter and every word, the meaning, the spelling, and how you say them.

Picture thinkers need an image with which to think. No image equals no thinking, and that expression in one ear and out the other is just built for us. The word dog will create an image. The word hegemony, I don't know even know how you say it, but it doesn't create an image. It is definitely in one ear and out the other. Now, I'd like you to close your eyes again if you would, and I'm going to say a word to you, and I'm going to ask you to picture the meaning. So if you can picture the meaning of the word tree, would that be possible? If you have a picture for a tree, then get rid of that one. And now I'm going to say the word house. Can you picture

the meaning of the word house? And then get rid of the house. Can you picture the meaning of the word car? Okay, last one. Can you picture the meaning of the word the T-H-E? Not the letters, THE, the meaning. I'm suspecting no. Okay, so you can open your eyes now. Thank you.

217 of these little words, commonly known as sight words, make up half of what we read no matter what grade level we are. And for teens and adults, there are going to be concepts. So at least two-thirds of what we read is blank in terms of a picture meaning. And as I said, no picture with which to think, there can be no thinking and understanding.

It's like reading redacted text. Hence, the need to reread and gain a glimmer of understanding. Now, the column on the left is a paragraph about the periodic table. The column in the middle has taken out all those little words, the trigger words, and the column on the right has taken out the concepts, and we're left with three picture words. But I have a feeling that the pictures attached to those words are not the ones that the author had in mind. It can be confusing, very confusing. That's why we don't do very well with non-fiction. We can usually manage to get through fiction reasonably well, but non-fiction is challenging.

Now, when you put these three components together, the fact that you can alter your perception, the fact that you think in images, and you need pictures for those words that you're expected to think with, and the fact that at least, I would say definitely a half, but probably two-thirds of what we read has no picture meaning. You're very likely to be labelled learning disabled. And just as an aside, those with ADHD, you'll probably be processing, as I said, 32 images per second. And you might be listening to someone who is speaking like me, two or three words a second. Thinking your attention might wander?

Now, there is a solution, which facilitators, such as myself do one on one, and I'm just going to share the solution with you. First of all, I show dyslexics how to focus, how to control that perception of theirs at will. Now, people will tell you to focus, pay attention, concentrate, but nobody ever tells you how. Most of us just concentrate like that and everything is very stressful and exhausting. Well, we show you how to focus very easily at will. We show you a way of controlling your energy levels yourself without the need for medication, and we show you how to relax. These three tools are vital to position you for learning. When that is done, we hunt out any confusions that may have been embedded in the uppercase and lowercase alphabet letters, punctuation marks, and numerals. When we were confused as we learned them early on, these confusions can get lodged in there. It's like walking through a minefield. We have to release the trigger. Our reading strategy is based on a foolproof visual recognition, no decoding, no guessing, no predicting. We make 3D models for the meaning of any word and we master it. This ensures that we have all three parts to a word, the meaning, the spelling and the pronunciation. We use a 3D medium of plasticine clay because you cannot separate the creative process from the learning process. Concepts in particular are necessary for post-secondary skills. For example, the meaning of change, consequence, time, sequence, and order versus disorder are needed for organization. Having eliminated the reasons for the challenges, the challenges cease to exist and you're able to learn in the way you were born to learn. In

reaching the cause, you eliminate the symptoms. If these methods are introduced to the whole class from day one, regardless of learning style, the challenges never have the opportunity to arise.

When faced with a challenge, we often find what we call coping mechanisms, workarounds, old solutions, whatever age we are. One adult told me he was always as good as the person next to him, which I thought was quite cute. Common old solutions are avoidance, concentration, the class clown, denial, and dependence. And when you remove the reason for the challenge, the old solution falls away. Today's accommodations, such as text to speech and speech to text, and spellcheck and ChatGPT, and AI fall into the dependence category for me. They have value as they enable us to keep up with our peers. They also enable us to cope with overwhelming amounts of reading and writing. This is for sure. But I believe the true gold dust is taking responsibility for yourself, knowing how you learn, what you need, and being able to provide it to yourself. Having taken the Davis program, my 10-year-old son said to me, "Mom, dyslexia is like a wound. In the past, they gave me band aids for it. Now I can heal it myself." Which is obviously why I trained to be a facilitator. Having said that, adults in particular are very often not the best at valuing themselves. They have the needs of families and friends to put before theirs. Some will choose to hold onto their own solutions. Some will feel comfortable with the learning disability label.

Typically, in school or the workplace, these are what I feel we thrive on. Bullet points, mind mapping with sketches not words, highlighting salient words. We enjoy visual comparisons like "feeling like a doormat" creates an image straightaway. We learn by observing and doing. We prefer watching films to reading books. We prosper when people believe in us, and we automatically switch off when faced with solid text.

Such as that.

When in fact, he meant that.

So I'm wondering if you found this slide presentation a little different. I'm thinking that maybe sound thinkers may not have resonated with this style. Hopefully, image-based thinkers did find it useful. And I'd like to compare that we dyslexic, I believe, can be compared to the Apple Macs in an education system designed for PCs. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with our computer. It is possible to facilitate both learning styles, and different does not have to correlate with disabled. Everyone is able to learn if they're taught in the way they were born to learn. I would like to introduce the idea of neuroinclusivity as the target.

Di D-I means two. So neurodivergent invites separation and judgment. And my call to action for today is, please tell as many people as you can that there is a specific gift of dyslexia and natural ability to alter perception, which underlies both the gifts, the talents and the challenges. And that we are the Apple Macs in a PC world. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with our computer. Our brains are working in exactly the way they should be operating. Different is not

disabled. The repercussions are too serious to ignore, and it is time to question the system. I would love teachers to have this knowledge before they even get into the classroom. It would make such a difference. And we have to stop trying to change the learning style of one-third of the population. We can't afford to squander so much potential. And for more information, you have our website and email address, and we obviously would love to hear from you. I just want to mention that last year, we were delighted to have the opportunity of creating a documentary. We called it "Who Knew: Dyslexia Is a Way of Thinking" <https://vimeo.com/1075009764/7bb12db0ff?share=copy>. And the film at the moment is doing the film festival circuit, which means it can't be on general release just yet, but hopefully next year. So please keep in touch with us if you'd like to view it, and we hope you enjoy it. And I would just like to thank you for being part of this welcome change in perception. And I think we have 2 minutes, 3 minutes for questions. If there's anything anybody would like to hear.

HELENA:

Oh, thank you, Sue. I hope you see all the appreciation. There actually is a question in the chat from Lauren. Does this approach complement or conflict with an Orton Gillingham approach? I don't know if you're familiar with that?

SUE:

Yes. That's a question that we get a lot. I think that most of the children I see have already got the challenges and they've had plenty of phonic instruction. So giving them any more phonic instruction isn't going to be too useful. But what I would like to point out that if you get these methods into school from K to 3, we would start with our approach, and then we would introduce the phonic instruction later on, just because our approach to the reading exercise, which is a visual one, it doesn't, it can't cause any confusion because you're spelling the letter, you're not trying to, you're not trying to guess whether C is going to go course. You're just telling me that you're seeing C, which is much easier to do than decoding.

HELENA:

Yeah, Kenneth asked that's in follow up, but how is touch included in support?

SUE:

When we're making the models, when we're making the alphabet, and when we're making the meanings behind those words, it's a whole complete process because we're creating it with our hands.

HELENA:

Another one, just wondering if there are specific fonts that work best.

SUE: Yes, that's a good question. I personally like the fonts that have an A like an A, rather than that funny one that looks a bit like an upside down E. I find very clear ones like Century Gothic or Calibri. Nothing too fussy. Hopefully, no serifs and definitely Italics and that type of thing. It can be confusing. I think there's a book "Percy Jackson," no, it's not that one. I can't remember

the book now, but there's so many different fonts in the layout. It is very, very confusing, but just clear and simple wins the day. Oh, someone said, Does adding colourful fonts help or hinder. I know a lot of people do like that. I tend to do that when I'm writing a report or something to highlight things. But if you're reading it, I think it can be a little bit confusing. Why did they make that colour? Anything that causes confusion is going to send our perception off into space. So simple is best. And like I said, bullets and highlighting,

HELENA:

Well, thank you so much for your presentation today Sue, I think many of us are going away with a new and deeper awareness of dyslexia and that it's a gift. And I invite all of you to take this conversation into your hallways, talk to your colleagues.

SUE: Thank you for the opportunity.

HELENA: Thanks, Sue.